

Op-Ed: Weekend at Osama's

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Even before Osama bin Laden was killed, the Obama administration began arguing that al-Qaeda was close to final defeat because so many of its senior leaders were now dead largely as a result of drone operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But that assessment depends on an awfully narrow definition of “al-Qaeda” — and of “dead.” Even before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, al-Qaeda was structured as a central organization with multiple national affiliates in the role of franchises. Today, that central “home office” is certainly far weaker than it was, but the affiliates remain, and they are anything but inactive.

More importantly, these “offline” organizations may no longer be the central issue. As Jarret Brachman argues, al-Qaeda today is primarily a social movement thanks to contemporary developments in information and communication technologies. In other words, it is an idea, an ideology, “al-Qaedaism,” or “bin Ladenism,” and one whose existence is in large part online.

The challenges in defeating an enemy who exists in the virtual realm are new, and they are in some ways daunting. For example, Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born al-Qaeda leader, was dangerous precisely because his online presence was devoted to radicalizing Western Muslims and motivating them to commit violence against their home or adopted countries. He was probably dangerous more so because of his virtual presence, which was so effective, rather than because of his capacity to personally mount operations against the West.

It is true that he himself had a hand in the Christmas Day bombing plot, and it is believed that he was involved in the attempt to bomb a plane by placing an explosive device in a printer cartridge. However, his online persuasive efforts have been linked to the Times Square bomber, the Fort Hood shooting, a second attempt at an attack at Fort Hood, the attempted bombing of a recruiting center in Maryland, the shooting at an Arkansas recruiting station, the “Fort Dix six,” as well as the plot to bomb New York City subways. (In Britain, he was linked to the London subway bombing, and the stabbing of a British Minister of Parliament by a British college student, and in Canada he was linked to the Toronto 18, a group who plotted to bomb a number of buildings in downtown Toronto, and who, in fact, tried to buy an amount of ammonium fertilizer — twice the amount used in Oklahoma City.) It is small surprise that the then-director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Michael Leiter, had identified al-Awlaki shortly before his death as the single greatest threat to the United States.

On September 30, 2011, Awlaki's death was confirmed. That morning (in other words, before anyone would have had a chance to create any commemorative videos), using

his name as a search term on You Tube turned up 5,220 videos in English — a mere 89 in Arabic. That, of course, is an underestimate, given the way You Tube structures its searches. (Obviously, not each of those is a unique video released by Awlaki: that includes reposts and remixes, but it is an indication of his popularity and reach.) And on December 20, a new video was released — only in part a new remix, but still a new video including entirely new footage, filmed before his death and held back. It may or may not be the last one that we will see.

The term “as Sahab” (the name of al-Qaeda's primary media production arm) yields 3,010 videos, the “Islamic State of Iraq,” a front organization for al-Qaeda in Iraq, turns up 2,950 presently — and that is in English. Killing the man, in other words, does nothing to eliminate an online media persona. It may, in fact, increase the persona's presence as videos memorializing the man begin to appear. Today there are almost 7,000 Awlaki videos.

I am in no way, shape, or form arguing against attacks on high value targets. Using drones or other types of attacks to kill high value al-Qaeda targets can be an effective strategy; certainly it has reduced the operational effectiveness of the original al-Qaeda group now located in the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AfPak) area, and perhaps these attacks have even made the AfPak area even less available as a destination for radicalized Westerners seeking training that is more advanced than what is available to them by watching videos on the Internet.

But we should not kid ourselves. Whether we call it the War on Terror, the Long War, the Global Insurgency, or anything else, a series of drone strikes in the Hindu Kush may be a necessary step in ending it — but it is a far cry from being sufficient. Defeating the offline, physical remnant of the original al-Qaeda group would certainly be a victory worth celebrating. But it is important to put that victory into context, and to be clear about what it means in relationship to the larger fight against violent jihadism this country is currently engaged in.